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ABSTRACT

This response to the British Government's White Paper on Broadcasting examines the role of broadcasting in promoting interracial understanding. The following topics are briefly discussed: (1) the need for the media to recognize the diversity of tastes and interests in a multicultural society; (2) the need for flexibility, editorial independence, and public accountability in broadcasting; (3) the role of a fourth television channel in giving access to programs for minorities; (4) the proposed expansion of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and independent local radio; (5) the problem of funding; (6) the role of the BBC External Services in bringing news to immigrants about their countries of origin; (7) the failure of the Independent Broadcasting Association (IBA) to provide ethnic minority programs on radio and television; (8) programming in Wales; (9) proposals for a Broadcasting Complaints Commission; and (10) the need for controls on the proportion of programs bought from overseas. (Author/MC)

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BROADCASTING IN A MULTI-RACIAL SOCIETY

OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 6

CRE response to the White Paper on Broadcasting

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Commission for Racial Equality

RESPONSE TO THE WHITE PAPER ON BROADCASTING

1. Under Section 43 of the Race Relations Act 1976, the Commission for Racial Equality has a general duty to work towards the elimination of unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups. It is in the context of this general duty that the Commission is responding to the Government's White Paper on Broadcasting.

2. Good race relations and equality of opportunity in Britain depend on the creation of understanding between ethnic minorities and the majority community. The way the press and broadcasting media report issues pertaining to ethnic minorities and race relations and the extent to which ethnic minorities are given the opportunity to use these channels to obtain information, entertainment, education and cultural satisfaction is of crucial importance in achieving this understanding. This applies to ethnic minorities from the New Commonwealth as well as others.

3. The Commission welcomes the clear recognition by the Government of:

   (i) the diversity of tastes and interests

   (ii) the need for the broadcasting media to cater for such tastes and interests in a society which was always multi-lingual, is certainly multi-cultural and multi-racial, and

   (iii) the increasing educational role which broadcasting plays in the country as well as its entertainment and information dissemination roles.

4. Recent research conducted into the impact of broadcasting services not only endorsed this but also stressed the extent to which ethnic minority programmes are 'consumed' by sections of the community who have serious linguistic and other handicaps but who are nevertheless assisted by such programmes to adjust themselves to life in this country.

5. The Commission also welcomes the Government's acceptance of the principles of flexibility, editorial independence and public accountability as three of the four requisites of good broadcasting (together with diversity as stressed in para. 2 above). In the context of its general duty, the Commission has emphasised the need for flexibility in developing programmes that deal with particular problems within ethnic minorities such as the increasing gap between those adolescents who were born in the UK and their immigrant parents and is encouraged by the efforts which some broadcasting organisations have already made in this direction. However, much more needs to be done and the Government's lead, as exemplified by the generally positive tone of this White Paper, should make it easier for broadcasting organisations to be more flexible in their programming than may have been the case in the past.

6. It therefore welcomes a fourth television channel not only because it will create more access to independent programme makers especially those who are especially concerned with programmes aimed at ethnic minority groups but also because of the Government's own clearly expressed intention that this new channel should cater for minority tastes and interests especially those which are not adequately catered for on existing channels.

7. Accordingly, the Commission is anxious to:

(i) encourage programme makers with intimate knowledge of ethnic minority communities to produce bold and imaginative programmes which will appeal to these communities in particular and to the host community in general and

(ii) encourage ethnic minorities to contribute towards the the work of broadcasting organisations in various ways and in the light of the Government's positive orientation to broadcasting on radio and TV inherent in the White Paper.

8. The Commission supports the Government's proposal to expand both BBC and independent local radio but is disappointed that few of the recently approved stations are sited where there are

significant numbers of ethnic minorities, while places such as Bradford, Burnley and Huddersfield still do not have local radio stations.

The Commission hopes that the needs of the ethnic minorities will not be over-looked by the Government when deciding the location of future local radio stations. Research in this field as reported in Who Tunes Into What [2] has shown that where they exist, local ethnic minority radio programmes are primary sources of information and entertainment, and satisfies some of the cultural needs of ethnic minority communities.

9. The Commission endorses the Government's recommendation that the IBA should be able to experiment with local radio stations run by non-profit-making trusts but is concerned that these trusts may not be fully alive to the urgent need to provide professional and imaginative ethnic minority broadcasting.

10. The Commission welcomes the Government's acknowledgement of the role of BBC External Services, because the news services they provide are often the main source of information for immigrants in Britain about their countries of origin. The role of BBC External Services in providing news and comment for people in Britain should not be overlooked.

11. The Commission would support any steps that would encourage programme makers to take the needs of the ethnic minorities more fully into account. If the proposed Service Management Boards (para 49) were set up, the Commission hopes that the Home Secretary would appoint representatives from the ethnic minorities to sit on them.

12. Unfortunately the Commission is unable to fully join with the Government and the Annan Committee in praising the performance of the IBA who have not so far fully shouldered their responsibilities by providing ethnic minority programmes on radio and TV. The Commission urges the IBA and its associated organisations to urgently review their contribution to radio and television programmes made for ethnic minorities consumption.

13. The Commission accepts the special case for programmes in the Welsh language within Wales. However, it would be reluctant to see the fourth channel in Wales devoted exclusively to Welsh language programming since there are ethnic minority communities in that Principality.

14. The Commission welcomes the Government's proposals for the creation of an independent Broadcasting Complaints Commission. It believes that persons who have been maligned or injured in programmes should be able to seek redress from the Broadcasting Complaints Commission whose rulings should not only have the force of law but should, in this specific context, include the power to compel broadcasting organisations against whom they have ruled, to broadcast retractions/apologies with the same prominence as the offending broadcast. To facilitate this, the CRE believes that complainants should waive their normal legal rights of access to the courts when making submissions to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

15. The Commission feels that, in view of the general lack of good programmes designed specifically for the ethnic minorities, stricter controls must be exercised on the proportion of programmes brought from overseas. Too often, the excuse for not providing more minority programmes of high quality is a shortage of funds. While it accepts that some of the press stories about the sums spent on non-British programmes should be treated with scepticism, and that the audience appeal of imported programmes is often greater in numerical terms than that of British ones, the Commission feels that the first priority should be given to programmes made for the British audience by British programme makers (paras 114-5).

REFERENCES

1. Home Office Broadcasting (White Paper) Cmnd. 7294, London, HMSO.

2. Muhammad Anwar, Who Tunes Into What?, London, Commission for Racial Equality, 1978.